The "spook" lies in a mid-way No-Man's-Land between the subtlety of the Satire (of which there have been too few good ones) and the heavy-handedness of the Burlesque (of which there have been far too many). While no rigid ground-rules have ever been laid down, the successful spook has to exist on two levels - as a comedy, and as a good example of its own genre. Today's two films do succeed on both levels, and they have a number of significant points in common. Both are brief (one runs 75 minutes, the other 73); and both refuse to tamper with the basic material to which its are from the norm, and this if anything throws the opposition of the heavies into even sharper and more menacing relief. Neither film is a major work, but both have an amiable easy-going charm that is totally absent from all the ultra-determined "send-ups", lampoons and exaggerated spooks that have been so prevalent (most especially in regard to the spy movie) in recent years.


One of the group of Universal's rowdy action shows ("The Spoilers", "When the Daitoms rode", "Seven Sinners") that immediately followed in the wake of the successful "Destry Rides Again", "Trail of the Vigilantes" is small-scale and economical, but given an illusory stability by its speed and by its cast. Even the comedy revolves around fast physical action, so the film never has a chance to slow down. While never marked by subtlety, it's never heavy-handed either, but maintains a nice balance throughout. It's always a treat to see young and vivacious Peggy Moran, and the rest of the cast is full of old favorites; so incidentally is the opening stock-shot montage, which pilgirms from Universal "A" and "B" westerns from "Smoking Guns" on up! Quite incidentally, just as "The Charge of the Light Brigade" was a turning point in the treatment of horses in stunt action scenes, so was this film a kind of historic landmark in the treatment (mainly financial!) of the stuntmen. Tom Steele (doubling for Warren William in the final fall) was then heading a campaign to better the monetary lot of the stuntmen, and it paid off during, and because of, all the stunt work in this film.

-- intermission --

"THE THREE MUSKETEERS" (20th Century Fox, 1939) Directed by Allan Dwan Associate Producer, Raymond Griffith; Screenplay by M.M. Kuselmam, William A. Drake and Sam Hellman from the novel by Alexandre Dumas; Camera, Peeverell Marley; Music, Samuel Penna and Walter Bullock; 7 reels With the Ritz Brothers, Don Ameche, Lionel Atwill, Gloria Stuart, Pauline Moore, Binnie Barnes, John Carradine, Miles Mander, Joseph Schildkraut, Douglas Dumbrille, Noroni Olson, John King, Russell Hitch, Gregory Gaye, Lester Matthews, Georges Renavent, Montague Shaw, Jean Parry, Fredric Vogeding, June Storey, Cino Corrado.

Since a musical comedy version of "Three Musketeers" is currently a big hit on the London stage this (unrelated) version can be considered to have been quite a bit ahead of its time! True Dumas devotees might shudder at the idea of the Ritz Brothers and Don Ameche tempering with their idol - yet in fact there is very little tempering in this film as a whole, far more faithful to both the spirit and letter of Dumas than, for example, that abysmal Rko Radio version wherein Walter Abel played D'Artagnan like a divorce lawyer! The low-comedy opening is not promising admittely, but thereafter the Ritz Brothers are restricted to periodic single interpolations (very funny if you like them, at least tolerable if you don't) and the film maintains a dash and a flair akin to that which Dwan brought to his straight swashbucklers with Fairbanks sr.

Other than eliminating the death of Constance, the script retains respectable Dumas, and while the marvellous cast of old troopers is largely wasted, with people like Carradine and Schildkraut given only a couple of scenes apiece, at least there is always some actor or note on stage throughout to keep the balance veering more to tradition than to vaudeville. All the Fox starring sets give it a size and stature transcending its budget, and Dwan really keeps his action moving. The print, a dupa, is a little soft, but generally quite satisfactory and certainly complete. -- Wm.K. Everson --